

# Althusserian Marxism— A Beginning Critique, Part II

by the Line of March Editorial Board\*

## IV. The “Stalinian Deviation”

Althusserian Marxism grows out of the attempt to analyze what is usually called “Stalinism.” Althusser himself prefers the term “Stalinian deviation” which he describes as follows: “The Stalinian deviation can be considered as a form. . . of the posthumous revenge of the Second International: as a revival of its main tendency. . . an economistic conception and line.”<sup>93</sup>

We have already examined what Althusserian Marxism means by “economism.” Althusserians do not utilize the term in the same way Lenin did to target the political deviation of bowing to the spontaneity of the worker’s movement, belittling the conscious element, etc. Nor is the term principally utilized to describe the historical and economic determinism associated with the revisionism of the Second International. Althusserians use “economism” essentially to describe what Marx, Engels, and Lenin meant by historical materialism—the view that development of the forces of production is principal in the forward motion of history.

In considering the formulation “Stalinian deviation” our main target is not Althusser, who has written relatively little on the subject. Our concern is principally with the views developed and promoted by Charles Bettelheim and secondarily with the way in which these views have been taken up by *Theoretical Review*. In this section we will begin

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\*In addition to the Editorial Board members, the collective that prepared this article included Michael Downing, Pat Gold, Ellen Kaiser, Carol Marsh, Bunny Olsen, and Mike Withey.

to hold *TR* more directly responsible for the theoretical framework it advances, especially since on certain critical questions *TR* abandons not only Marxism, but even Althusser.

Bettelheim and *TR* base themselves on the view that the Soviet experience beginning with the period in which Stalin headed the CPSU has been fundamentally a negative experience for the international proletariat. They are not alone in this view. Trotskyism, anarchism, social democracy, and, of course, the bourgeoisie itself have their own reasons (many of which overlap) for considering "Stalinism" as having cast an indelibly negative shadow across Soviet and world history.

Bettelheim and *TR* believe that the crucial turning point in the history of the communist movement took place in 1929 when the "economist line" on socialist construction represented by Stalin defeated the "revolutionary line" represented by Nikolai Bukharin.

Paul Costello, editor of *TR*, sums it up as follows: "Economism elevates the contradiction between productive forces and production relations over the class contradiction (class struggle), and designates productive forces rather than class struggle as the motor force in history."<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere *TR* notes that in the Soviet Union, "this economism manifested itself in a theory of building socialism which can be called the theory of the primacy of the productive forces."<sup>95</sup>

Utilizing this framework, Bettelheim has developed a particular analysis of Soviet history in the 1920s.<sup>96</sup> His thesis is roughly this: The famous New Economic Policy (NEP) launched by Lenin in 1921 was conceived of not as a temporary tactical retreat but as the strategic path to socialism. At the heart of the NEP was a close alliance between the Soviet working class and the peasantry. In the line struggle between Bukharin and Stalin, Bukharin defended the NEP and the worker/peasant alliance. Stalin proposed to scuttle the NEP because of his "economist" view that only by concentrating on the development of heavy industry could the Soviet Union become socialist. At the same time, Stalin proposed to rupture the worker/peasant alliance with the policy of forced collectivization of agriculture. Here is Costello's rendition:

"After Lenin's death, one line in the Bolshevik party, led by Bukharin, continued to uphold the NEP, arguing that it was essential to socialist construction, to Soviet democracy, and for the harmonious development of all branches of the economy. It called for a strengthening of the dictatorship of the proletariat and for winning the masses to communism. The line represented by Stalin, on the contrary, began to downplay the importance of the worker-peasant alliance, saw the construction of socialism primarily as a result of the smooth functioning of economic and administrative apparatuses and on the external compulsion of the peasants to adopt collective forms of production. . . .

"The basis of the NEP was the recognition that the different branches of industry had to develop harmoniously in relation to one another, that industry could only develop together with the growth of agriculture. To emphasize the growth of industry *at the expense of* agriculture would not only cause great economic hardship, but would also seriously threaten the worker-peasant alliance. . . . Stalin's conception of economic development, on the other hand, 'ignored the need to respect certain *ratios* between the development of the different branches of the economy'.<sup>97</sup> It was based on a one-sided emphasis on heavy industry and by a narrow technicist emphasis which saw economic struggle not as between capitalist and socialist relations of production but between old and new technology."<sup>98</sup>

This summation flows from Bettelheim's conception of socialism and socialist construction which sees "the socialist transition as a period in which the direct control of the producers over their various conditions of existence (economic, political, ideological, and theoretical) is increased so as to establish the necessary conditions for the establishment of a communist mode of production."<sup>99</sup> The model for this view is the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which, according to *TR*, "was aimed at continuing and deepening the socialist transition, i.e., it was aimed at increasing the direct control of the producers over their conditions of existence at the various levels of the social formation."<sup>100</sup>

This particular conception of the "Stalinian deviation," then, has two somewhat distinct aspects. The historical aspect is based on a particular summation of early Soviet history. The theoretical aspect is based on a particular view of the relationship between, and the definition of, forces and relations of production, the nature of the class struggle, and the correct path to socialist construction, which includes (as we shall see) a concomitant view of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In this article we cannot fully explore all the questions which this perspective raises. But we will undertake to address briefly those which appear to be most central to it.

Let us take up the historical side of the question first, beginning with the NEP. The argument, advanced by Bettelheim, and more explicitly by *TR*, that the NEP was conceived by Lenin as a strategic path to socialism covering a lengthy historical period is incorrect, as is the assertion that the basis of the NEP was some harmonious development of all branches of industry simultaneously.

The NEP was conceived as the solution to pressing and particular problems of the Bolshevik Revolution: Capitalist encirclement, no immediate prospects for European-wide revolution, an economy devastated by war and characterized by small-scale commodity production. The solution was daring. Permit (indeed, encourage) private enterprise (market economy) in both industry and agriculture for a period of time in order to restore the economy. The proletariat could not

even begin to establish a planned socialist economy so long as the economy lay in ruins, and industry was scattered and operating on a small-scale.

The goal of the NEP was to unleash the productive forces of the economy within a capitalist framework controlled by the proletariat. Lenin called this "state-monopoly capitalism," saying as early as 1918 that "Russia cannot advance from the economic situation now existing here without traversing the ground which is *common* to state capitalism and to socialism (national accounting and control)." <sup>101</sup>

As we have pointed out previously, <sup>102</sup> Lenin's understanding of "socialization" of industry—grievously distorted by the Althusserians—entailed large-scale production requiring the scientific division of labor typical of capitalist industry. Lenin did not see a transformation of the secondary production relations, in the Bettelheim sense of the term, that is, the relationship between mental/manual, coordination/direct execution, etc., as the prerequisite for socialism. Lenin's conception of the relations of production which needed to be transformed were first and foremost the property relations, a point of view thoroughly consistent with Marxism. The burning question facing the Soviets at the launching of the NEP was could the proletariat keep state power long enough to consolidate the transformed class relations in Russian society. The NEP was a calculated and sophisticated gamble to answer this question in the affirmative. Accordingly, Lenin could argue that "state-monopoly capitalism is a complete *material* preparation for socialism, the *threshold* of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism *there are no intermediate rungs*." <sup>103</sup> But even this, Lenin realized, could not be accomplished "at one stroke":

"Our poverty and ruin are so great that we can not restore large scale socialist state industry *at one stroke*. This can be done with large stocks of grain and fuel in the big industrial centers, replacement of worn out machinery, and so on. . . . we know that after the ruinous imperialist war even the wealthiest and most advanced countries will be able to solve this problem only over a fairly long period of years. Hence it is necessary, to a certain extent, to help restore *small* industry, which does not demand of the state machines, large stocks of new materials, fuel and food, and which can immediately render some assistance to peasant farming and increase its productive forces right away . . . . What is to be the effect of all this? It is the revival of the petty bourgeoisie and of capitalism on the basis of some freedom of trade (if only local). That much is certain and it is ridiculous to shut our eyes to it." <sup>104</sup>

Lenin well understood the limitations of the NEP, particularly the problems bound to be caused by encouraging capitalism in areas of the economy. But he was convinced that such a program was necessary in order to prepare the way for socialism, particularly to prepare the



material base. And far from seeing this as a very long period, he actually saw it as a relatively brief one.

"We must know how to overcome, to reduce to a definite minimum all of its [NEP's] negative features, which there is no need to enumerate and which you know perfectly well. We must know how to arrange everything shrewdly. . . . We have approached the very core of the everyday problems and that is a tremendous achievement. Socialism is no longer a matter of the distant future, or an abstract picture, or an icon. . . . Difficult as this task may be, new as it may be as compared with our previous task, and numerous as the difficulties may be that it entails, we shall all—not in a day, *but in a few years*—all of us together fulfill it whatever the cost, so that NEP Russia will become socialist Russia." <sup>105</sup> (our emphasis)

Summing up the results to date of the NEP in 1922, Lenin said: "The crisis began, I think, in February 1921. In the spring of that year we decided unanimously. . . to adopt the New Economic Policy. Now, after eighteen months have elapsed, at the close of 1922, we are able to make certain comparisons. . . Has this retreat been of any benefit to us? . . . the past eighteen months provide positive and absolute proof that we have passed the test." <sup>106</sup> Later in the same speech, Lenin said: "We must economize now though it is often at the expense of the population. . . . We must do this, because we know that unless we save heavy industry, unless we restore it, we shall not be able to build up an industry at all; and without an industry we shall go under as an independent country. . . . The salvation of Russia lies not only in a good harvest on the peasant farms—that is not enough; and not only in the good condition of light industry, which provides the peasantry with consumer goods—this, too, is not enough; we also need *heavy* industry. And to put it in a good condition will require several years of work." <sup>107</sup> (emphasis in original)

But if Lenin did not have a conception of the NEP as some lengthy historical period designed to promote all branches of production in some "harmonious" fashion, where did this conception come from? It came principally from Bukharin, who had developed a view of the transition to socialism which was quite at odds with the general orientation of the party and with Lenin's view.

Ironically, if there was indeed an economic determinist orientation to the construction of socialism in the USSR, it was Bukharin's, not Stalin's. Far from opposing a "productive forces" view of socialism, Bukharin based his whole program on the assumption that the development of the productive forces was the key step toward socialism. His disagreement with Stalin was over how to accomplish this. Bukharin's view was *that this could be best advanced through a lengthy period of precisely the market relations which the NEP promoted and reproduced*. Far from advancing a "class struggle" perspective on the transition to socialism, as our rewriters of history would have us believe,

Bukharin held that socialism would evolve in an extremely gradual fashion, that it would "grow out" of capitalism by following the same essential path as that of capitalist development.

✓ Bukharin pointed to the way in which capitalist industry had developed—from commodity production in agriculture to consumer-oriented manufacturing (light industry) and *then* to heavy industry in response to the competitive demands of a market economy—as the model which socialism would have to follow in Russia. Given the enormous size of the peasant population in Russia, Bukharin proposed "the adaptation of industry to the peasant market"<sup>108</sup> as the long range path of development. This meant concentrating on those industries oriented toward personal consumption, such as textiles, with heavy industry growing as the result of increasing demands on consumer industry to increase production. Such demands, of course, could be made only if the peasantry had the wherewithal to purchase the products.

Calling for "economic growth on the basis of market relations,"<sup>109</sup> Bukharin argued that there would be, under capitalism, "a vanquishing of the market by the market itself, free competition changing into monopoly. . . . Sooner or later the market itself will die off. . . . It turns out that we will come to socialism precisely through market relations."<sup>110</sup>

✓ As Bukharin's sympathetic biographer, Stephen Cohen, notes: "The linchpin of his program was the encouragement of private peasant accumulation, thereby broadening the rural demand for industrial products and increasing the marketable surplus of peasant agriculture."<sup>111</sup> He held on to this position long after the immediate economic recovery, for which Lenin was concerned, had been in the main accomplished. Bukharin himself put it this way: "The greater the buying powers of the peasantry, the faster our industry develops. . . . Kopeck accumulation in the peasant economy is the basis for ruble accumulation in socialist industry."<sup>112</sup>

One sure way to lose sight of the class struggle is to obscure the fact that the peasantry is essentially a petit bourgeois class, far from homogenous. The peasantry in Russia in particular was far from being an undifferentiated mass. The overwhelming majority of the peasantry was dirt-poor.\* In fact, in increasing numbers, they were leaving the countryside and heading for the cities to seek employment in industry. Their purchasing power was extremely limited. What was really being argued by Bukharin was not the defense of the interests of the whole

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\*The immediate effect of the NEP recovery was that the poor peasants were economically stabilized and enriched. However by the late '20s the basic class polarization between poor and rich peasants had re-emerged in a spiral fashion, on a higher level.

peasant class, but the encouragement of the stratum of rich peasants. At times Bukharin stated the problem more frankly:

"The prosperous stratum of the peasantry and the middle peasant who also aspires to become prosperous *are at present afraid to accumulate*. There is a situation where the peasant is afraid to install an iron roof for fear of being declared a kulak [rich peasant]; if he buys a machine, then he does it in such a way that the Communists will not notice. Higher technique becomes conspiratorial." <sup>113</sup>

Clearly this would not do, declared Bukharin.

"We must say to the whole peasantry, to all its strata: enrich yourselves, accumulate, develop your economy. . . . We do not hinder kulak accumulation and we do not strive to organize the poor peasant for a second *expropriation* of the kulak." <sup>114</sup>

The real content of Bukharin's agitation on behalf of the worker/peasant alliance was to continue to make substantial concessions to the rich peasants. In fact, of necessity, Bukharin's conception of the worker/peasant alliance is completely hinged on these long term concessions to the upper stratum of the peasantry because his entire scheme of economic development depended upon it. For this reason, Bukharin increasingly fell into the habit of discussing the peasantry as an undifferentiated mass, a habit continued by Bettelheim and his followers today.

This "oversight" was a logical extension of Bukharin's line. The poor peasant could barely produce enough for his own use; in many cases, less, resulting in an attrition of poor peasants from the rural areas. At the same time, the kulaks were able to buy up the land of the poor peasants and to employ the poor peasants as an agricultural proletariat on their larger holdings. This was one of the "negative features" to which Lenin was referring in his earlier comments on the NEP.

A general point about the nature of the peasant class and the worker/peasant alliance is appropriate here. The peasantry, as a petit bourgeois class, inherently contains within itself the basis for class polarization. The rich peasants tend to achieve their privileged status at the expense of the lower and middle peasants, who are steadily impoverished and pushed into the ranks of the urban and rural proletariat. The key task of the party under the dictatorship of the proletariat is to skillfully guide and handle this class struggle in such a fashion that it will contribute to the *overall and long-term consolidation of socialism*. This is the political essence of the worker/peasant alliance. Therefore tactically it will entail different policies at different periods. In the course of the Soviet experience, it entailed at one point mitigating temporarily the class struggle in order to stabilize and encourage agricultural recovery, to feed the cities and stave off the assault of the international bourgeoisie; at another point it required breaking the back

of the kulak class in order to lay the foundation for the wide-scale collectivization of agriculture and the structural elimination of small commodity production in the rural areas.

Consequently it is absurd to hold that the Leninist conception of a worker/peasant alliance, at the heart of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, was based on the permanent reinforcement of the class differentiation in the countryside. Lenin's conception of the worker/peasant alliance had a different foundation:

"The proletariat, after having defeated the bourgeoisie, must unswervingly conduct its policy toward the peasantry along the following fundamental lines. The proletariat must separate, demarcate the working peasant from the peasant owner, the peasant worker from the peasant huckster, the peasant who labors from the peasant who profiteers. In this demarcation lies the *whole essence* of socialism."<sup>115</sup>

As either a theoretical or a practical proposition, it is easy to see why the NEP was, of necessity, a relatively short term measure. By its very nature, operating on the basis of a market economy, it prevented the development of centralized planning. At the same time, it fostered the growth, reproduction, and expansion of capitalist relations in the countryside. And yet it had to be undertaken in order to re-establish a sufficient economic stability and basis to even begin the step by step socialization of industry, elimination of petty commodity production, and establishment of the conditions for socialist planning.

Bettelheim and his followers have attached all other kinds of meanings to the NEP, but these are strictly of their own invention (or borrowed directly from Bukharin's increasingly tortured defense of the NEP during the developing line struggle in the late 1920s). These inventions flow not from Lenin's materialist conception of the political and economic requirements for the development of socialism, but from Bettelheim's idealist vision of a socialism in which the transformation of production relations—as exemplified in the stated goals of the Cultural Revolution in China—becomes the central and overriding task in socialist construction.

But the Stalin/Bukharin line struggle over the future of the NEP was not carried out merely on the level of an abstract theoretical debate over which would be the ideal and optimum path to socialism. Rather it emerged in a most pressing fashion out of the real situation facing the Soviet Union in the middle and late 1920s. Bukharin's vision of a gradual transition to socialism was defeated, not so much by a theoretical refutation or Stalin's organizational maneuverings but principally because *as a policy it was proving to be ineffective, and was economically and politically destabilizing (rather than strengthening) Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat!*

The proven value of the NEP was in its capacity to restore the economy to the point where the existing industrial plant was back



operating at full capacity. In that sense it was successful. The achievements in the period 1921-1926 were so impressive that many of NEP's proponents, including Bukharin, could develop illusions about the long term prospects of this policy. However, by 1925 there were already signs that the negative features of the NEP were ripening.

The first sign was a shortage of manufactured goods. This "goods famine" was relatively mild, but it was a straw in the wind, indicating that the real problem of the Soviet economy was not simply the question of stimulating consumer demand as the trigger for industrial development. Rather the real problem was the structural weakness of Soviet industry which could neither sustain expansion of light industry nor technically develop agricultural production.

The shortage of goods, in turn, led to shortfalls in grain collections in 1925, a sizeable drop occurring despite a good harvest. Clearly this phenomenon was the reflection of a social contradiction, central to which was the fact that a substantial portion of the harvest was in the hands of the kulaks. Meanwhile urban unemployment was on the rise, largely as a result of poor peasant migration to the city. Bukharin's proposed solution to this problem was to generate additional agricultural employment in the countryside—which, given the class relations prevailing under the NEP, could only mean further freeing the kulaks to enlarge their holdings and employ greater numbers of the new, impoverished agricultural proletarians.

Others in the party by that time were arguing for the development of new industry in the cities—both to absorb the growing number of unemployed and to further develop the economy. The problem was where to find the new capital required to invest in expanded industry.

Grain collections picked up somewhat in 1926, but the other problems remained and intensified. The chief indicator of difficulties was that by mid-year the existing industrial plant was operating at close to full capacity but clearly was not producing enough to keep up with consumer demand, particularly the demands of that sector of the peasantry which had taken Bukharin's advice and proceeded to enrich themselves. By 1927, unemployment had risen drastically, lending new ammunition to those in the party who wanted to expand industry. Bukharin himself conceded that greater investment in industry would have to occur. But while left forces in the party argued that the source of this capital could only come from the agricultural surplus—meaning a policy of larger enforced grain collections by the state—Bukharin stood staunchly opposed to such measures, arguing that to press the peasantry would rupture the worker/peasant alliance and that the additional capital should come from surplus profits in state-owned industry. A nice proposal, unfortunately easier envisioned than accomplished in real life, given the overwhelmingly backward, agricultural character of the Soviet economy at that time. ✓

✓ On another level the Bukharin line also displayed a conspicuous blindness to the realities of the class struggle. The Soviets could not afford to linger on this question; developments in the international class struggle enveloped their debate. Bukharin predicted a period of extended capitalist stability; Stalin argued the imminence of a crisis of overproduction and war. By 1928 fascism had triumphed in Italy and was conspicuously on the rise in Germany. Germany's absolutely untenable post-WWI situation was bound to result in war; the only question was exactly how and when. The reactionary *coup d'état* in Poland, resulting in an anticommunist dictatorship, politically cleared the traditional Western military invasion corridor into the heartland of Russia. Soviet relations with England were deteriorating rapidly. In the East, Japanese militarism was on the rise, preparing to invade China. The Kuomintang reactionaries, inspired by the imperialists, had attacked the communists and destroyed the united front. And international monopoly capitalism was indeed approaching its most devastating economic and political crisis.

At the same time, the situation in the Soviet countryside continued to deteriorate. The shortage of manufactured goods combined with price controls on foodstuffs led to another drastic drop in state grain procurements, clearly the result of peasant hoarding. Emergency measures to enforce collections of surpluses being held by kulaks were taken, which in turn led to panic among intermediate strata of the peasantry. Grain collections fell again. The prospect of grave food shortages confronted the Soviet working class.

✓ It was this concrete situation that brought the simmering Stalin-Bukharin dispute to a head. Bukharin, acknowledging the severity of the problems, called for moderate, cautious measures designed principally to restore the confidence of the wealthier peasants. He also conceded that more attention would have to be paid to investing in heavy industry. Striving to hold on to the fundamental conceptions of the NEP, Bukharin argued:

"We think that the formula which calls for maximum investment in heavy industry is not quite correct, or rather, quite incorrect. If we must put the main emphasis on the development of heavy industry, then we must still combine this development with a corresponding development of light industry, which has a more rapid turnover, which realizes profits more rapidly, and which repays those sums expended on it sooner. We must, I repeat, strive for the most favorable combination." <sup>116</sup>

✓ Stalin's view, on the other hand, was that the fundamental flaw in Bukharin's line was the conception that the NEP policies could continue to guide the transition to socialist construction indefinitely. Stalin saw the crisis not simply as phenomenal or the result of the incorrect handling

of certain problems with the peasantry, as Bukharin contended. To Stalin—and to a majority of the CPSU leadership—it was a *structural crisis* flowing out of the inexorable logic of the current economic line, which no longer corresponded to the needs of the Soviet revolution.

In the face of such a crisis and with the danger of war growing, the Soviet people would have to sacrifice short term gains for the long term defense of proletarian power in the USSR and internationally. Far from seeing the development of the productive forces as providing some smooth, determinist, evolutionary transition to socialism, which was actually Bukharin's line, Stalin recognized the central role of class struggle. The economic foundations of Soviet socialism and ultimately the political question of the continuation of Soviet power required a determined and decisive struggle to transform the outstanding remnant of bourgeois relations of production in the Soviet countryside. Unlike our muddle-headed theoretician Bettelheim, whose concept of "class struggle" revolves around the extent to which the "direct producers" actually make decisions, Stalin and the CPSU were confronting a very real and pressing class struggle on two fronts: one was the international front, where the imperialist bourgeoisie, in spite of their fierce competition with each other, were developing schemes that would attempt to destroy the first socialist state. The other front was in the Soviet countryside where the kulaks were steadily maturing into a rural bourgeoisie with increasing economic and political leverage vis-a-vis the proletarian dictatorship—a relatively powerful fifth column in the eventuality of an imperialist invasion.

Whether or not one agrees in every particular with Stalin's line, the charge that it was a line characterized by the notion that the transition to socialism could be accomplished through neglect of the class struggle is ridiculous. Such a position requires the grossest distortion of Soviet history and the reality of class struggle.

Certainly, Stalin's understanding of class struggle showed none of the anarcho-idealist deviations evidenced in China's Cultural Revolution. It certainly was not based on the idealist viewpoint that the task before the revolution was to begin establishing "communist relations" of production even prior to the establishment of the material basis for socialism, in a period when Soviet power could still be *fatally* threatened by world imperialism. The class struggle which the Soviet working class had to undertake at that period of history and over the next two decades was not nearly so elusive. There was not then (or in fact is there ever) the luxury of devising formulae for the construction of socialism on the basis of abstract principles removed from the concreteness of history.

We will not, in this article, attempt to take up the question of Stalin and the later period of Soviet history. The need for an accurate summation of that period certainly cries out to be done. The communist movement cannot be satisfied with either the totally adulatory view of Stalin which

comprised the *official* summation up until 1956 or with the Khrushchev denunciation, especially since the latter was clearly employed as the device for developing and consolidating a revisionist deviation in the general line of the CPSU.

In our opinion a serious materialist critique of Stalin's leadership would proceed from the assumption that during the period 1929-1953 the foundations of socialism were qualitatively laid in the Soviet Union. This monumental achievement was accomplished under extremely difficult conditions and with no advanced experiences to serve as a model, in the course of which many mistakes were made, some quite serious with long range negative impact. Certainly many of the negative features were probably unavoidable historically. Others were not. What was universal about the Soviet experience and what was particular remains to be sorted out, along with a summation of the positive and negative features of the Soviet line and practice during the Stalin years.

The question is on what terrain will that all-sided evaluation take place. We believe that history has conclusively demonstrated that the negative features of the Stalin period can only be understood in the context of the overwhelmingly positive gains scored by the Soviet working class (and the international working class) during that period. The victory of the Stalin line set the basis for an industrial revolution in the Soviet Union that led to the collectivization and mechanization of agriculture and the full socialization and development of Soviet industry. It made possible the military defense of the Soviet Union and the defeat of fascism. It established political, military and economic conditions highly favorable for the revolutions in China, Vietnam and Korea and for the foundations of socialism in Eastern Europe. If this opinion constitutes a defense of Stalin, so be it; it is also a defense of historical materialism.

So much for the historical side of the question. Now let us briefly examine the theoretical aspect. On previous occasions in the pages of this journal we have extensively critiqued Bettelheim's distortions of the Marxist concept of "relations of production."<sup>117</sup> We do not intend to dwell again on the point here. We merely remind our readers that Bettelheim (and by extension *TR*) does not principally refer to the fundamental class/property relations when using the term "relations of production." For the purpose of this article however, we want to concentrate on two other questions: the debate over the relationship between the forces and relations of production, and the nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Does emphasizing the primacy of the productive forces lead to an "evolutionary" rather than a "class struggle" view of history, as the Althusser school contends? The distortion of this important question is probably Maoism's most distinctive negative feature in the realm of theory. For Maoism popularized a nonexistent contradiction between



productive forces and class struggle which is a complete distortion of Marxism. This was echoed by Charles Bettelheim who is the major political and theoretical bridge between Maoism and the Althusserians. What does Engels have to say about this relationship?

"Marx has proved that the whole of previous history is a history of class struggles, that in all the manifold and complicated political struggles the only thing at issue has been the social and political rule of social classes, the maintenance of domination by older classes and the conquest of domination by newly arising classes. To what, however, do these classes owe their origin and their continued existence? They owe it to the particular material, physically sensible conditions in which society at a given period produces and exchanges its means of subsistence." <sup>118</sup>

When Marxists attribute the primary role to the productive forces, they are upholding the materialist conception of history. Productive forces constitute the human race's relationship to nature, existing even before the rise of class society. It was the development of the productive forces, with the attendant social surplus, that set the conditions for classes to emerge. The level of development of the productive forces establishes the material conditions for the emergence of one or another set of property relations. Clearly modern day capitalism could not have developed in a society which had not previously mastered the use of steam and electrical power.

This understanding is a cornerstone of materialism because, in its absence, we can mistakenly conclude that any expressions of the relations of production that can be imagined are capable of being developed regardless of time, place and circumstance. Indeed, this is precisely the erroneous line of Mao's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. True to the idealism inherent in this view, Bettelheim and his followers are unable to realize that the failure of the Cultural Revolution is itself the verification of the materialist world view that there exist objective laws of economic development which cannot be ignored. Instead they cling to the illusion that the Cultural Revolution was an admirable "left alternative" to the "economist" general line which guided Soviet development—even though this "alternative" collapsed in utter chaos! ✓

But what about class struggle? Marx and Engels never saw the *decisive* role played by the productive forces in the development of human history as contradicting in any way the concept that class struggle is the motor force propelling that history forward. It is the same essential point at different levels of abstraction and it is the height of theoretical obscurantism to pose them in opposition to each other in order to set up a false polemic with Stalin. Since the emergence of class society, on a concrete level it is pointless to speak about the forces of production

abstracted out from the prevailing property/class relations in which they must manifest themselves. The fettering, advancement and consolidation of qualitatively new forces of production in human society has always thrown to the forefront the property question—the tension and clash of class interests—in short, the class struggle.

The development of the productive forces is a historical process which constantly outstrips the relations of production (the property relations) under which they operate. Their further development requires a transformation in the property relations. But the property relations will not automatically change simply as a result of the deepening contradiction with the forces of production. The contradiction is expressed in people organized into definite classes based objectively on their respective relationship to the means of production. It is the struggle between these classes—one whose interests now coincide with advances in the productive forces, the other whose interests represent the outmoded property relations—that moves history forward. Are we saying that the proletariat represents “new productive forces”? Concededly the question is not always posed this way. But on a certain level of abstraction that is precisely what the proletariat represents.

The proletariat is the concrete representation of the socialization of the labor process, a powerful new *productive force* which emerges under capitalism but is ultimately fettered by it. The proletariat freed of private property has no conflicting interests to the development of centralized planning, another powerful new *productive force* which also emerges under capitalism but which is only partially and inadequately realized due to capitalist property relations. The proletariat represents the ideological motivation of the working class in production, another new *productive force* which socialism sets the basis to bring fully into being by ending the alienation between the producers and their social product.

Socialist relations of production, therefore, correspond to the new level of development of the productive forces and in turn make possible an enormous revolution in them. The particularity of socialism as a transition period between capitalism and communism (socialism is the first or lower stage of communism) is that the proletariat is able to lay the material foundations under its own centralized control for the ultimate flowering of the communist mode of production.

In the course of this process, the class struggle continues to be waged: against attempts at counter-revolution, against the remnants of capitalist production and social relations, and against the remnants of bourgeois ideology.

In this last category we include revisionism which fosters vacillation in the face of the class struggle and seeks the easy road to communism, characterized by pronounced deviations toward mechanical materialism and economic determinism, thereby preventing the full utilization of the creative energy of the masses in the process of socialist construction.

This is an all too familiar and serious problem accompanying socialist construction. However equally important, but less widely targeted, is the deviation toward petit bourgeois utopianism which mystifies socialism and attempts to separate it from its material foundations. The struggle against this petit bourgeois utopianism, of which we had abundant evidence in the Cultural Revolution and in the notorious Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea, is an ideological and theoretical struggle of mounting urgency among communists internationally. ✓

Lastly let us examine the Althusserian conception of proletarian dictatorship. Althusser's principal collaborator, Etienne Balibar, writes:

"The dictatorship of the proletariat is a *general historical tendency toward communism* which, *under capitalism*, manifests itself in increasing socialization of production on the one hand and the class struggle of the proletariat on the other. And inasmuch as socialism is a transition period, embodying within it elements of its past (capitalism) and its future (communism) the dictatorship of the proletariat exists to the degree that the class struggle of the proletariat serves the strengthening of the communist elements at the expense of the capitalist ones." <sup>119</sup> (our emphasis)

Surely Balibar is not suggesting with this remarkable comment on the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat *under capitalism* that the proletariat holds power in a capitalist society. What kind of class dictatorship is this which does not yet hold power? What does he mean? Apparently for Balibar the seizure of state power by the proletariat and the expropriation of the expropriators—the transformation of property relations—is a mere quantitative difference of degree compared to the situation prevailing under capitalism. An incidental "conjuncture" tilting the teeter-totter of history in favor of the "communist" interests of the proletariat—oh so tenuously! possibly only temporarily! ✓

Further, Balibar establishes as the central criterion of the dictatorship of the proletariat "the strengthening of the communist elements" in society and production. This whole conception is actually quite remarkable for a school that prides itself on being anti-Hegelian. For it presupposes an absolute idea of what "communist relations" are before developed communism has actually appeared in the world and judges history by whether or not it is moving in that direction. A more idealist conception is hard to imagine. Marx, Engels and Lenin laid out—aside from the materialist conception of the *property* relations—only some very general and speculative thoughts on what are usually termed "communist relations." Many people have latched on to these and made them into a set of absolute criteria based not on the realities of the communist mode of production but on an egalitarian set of values developed in the context of capitalist society. These speculations probably bear some resemblance to what communist relations will actually be; but that is the most that can be said of them. To absolutize ✓

these speculations into the immediate goal of proletarian dictatorship divorced from the actual historical unfolding of socialist society is sheer idealism. It presumes, Hegel-like, the pre-existence of an *absolute idea* of what idealized communist relations actually are or should be, it only remaining for humanity to realize that idea in life.

Finally we would like to add to Balibar's curious notion of socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat *TR*'s own version: "Socialism itself is not a mode of production, but a non-linear series of conjunctures reflecting contradictory combinations of capitalist and communist elements."<sup>120</sup> Both are thoroughly obscure and sterile theoretically without the slightest ring of political life to them—in fact, without the slightest sense of the class struggle!

To this we contrast Lenin's comment:

"The dictatorship of the proletariat is a most determined and most ruthless war waged by the new class against a *more powerful* enemy, the bourgeoisie, whose resistance is increased *tenfold* by its overthrow (even if only in one country), and whose power lies not only in the strength of international capital, in the strength and durability of the international connections of the bourgeoisie, but also in the force of habit, in the strength of small production. . . . Small production *engenders* capitalism and the bourgeoisie continuously daily, hourly, spontaneously, and on a mass scale. . . . The experience of the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has clearly shown even to those who are unable to think, or who have not had occasion to ponder over this question, that absolute centralization and the strictest discipline of the proletariat constitute one of the fundamental conditions for victory over the bourgeoisie."<sup>121</sup>

This is why we contend that the Bettelheim/*TR* conception of the "Stalinian deviation" has nothing in common with Leninism. It poses a fanciful class struggle against a real class struggle that was actually unfolding in Russia and the world in 1929. To attempt, at this late date, to resurrect a Bukharinist fantasy that had already demonstrated its failure in life, is probably a fitting stance for those whose conception of class struggle, proletarian dictatorship, and socialism is so little rooted in life.

## V. Theoretical Review: Bringing Althusserian Marxism to the U.S. Communist Movement

While Althusserian Marxism has emerged as an intellectual current in West European communist circles—and seems to have had some influence in sectors of the Latin American movement—it has rarely assumed an organizational form in its own right due to the fact that it has remained politically eclectic and inconsistent. Thus Althusser was a member of the French Communist Party throughout the period of his major theoretical production, while Poulantzas was active in the Greek



Communist Party of the Interior (the Eurocommunist as opposed to the pro-Soviet Communist Party of the Exterior) until his death. Bettelheim does not seem to have undertaken any organizational activities except for his influence on French Maoism in general through his work in the Franco-Chinese Friendship Association until 1977, when he resigned because of disagreements with the new Chinese leadership's reversal of the principles and verdicts of the Cultural Revolution.

This much is in the nature of Althusserian Marxism whose "critical" character embraces a wide-ranging assortment of political views. It is hard to imagine a single political organization capable of containing both a Poulantzas and a Bettelheim, for instance, which would still be able to maintain a politically effective basis of unity. The very eclectic nature of Althusserian Marxism leads to a certain inevitable political paralysis as a trend.

In this sense, the U.S. communist movement is unique in that an attempt to give Althusserian Marxism an organizational expression has emerged within it. This is the task undertaken by the *Theoretical Review*, although it is probably only the relatively primitive state of the U.S. communist movement that makes such a curious enterprise even imaginable. On a political level, *TR*'s enterprise shows very little long range promise for success. As distinct from Europe, even the revisionist CPUSA is far too weak and too bound to the CPSU to provide the political atmosphere which would allow Althusserian Marxism to coexist comfortably in its periphery of left wing intellectuals. The Maoist trend, particularly in the U.S., has also remained far too infantile, and has become far too compromised due to its collaboration with the U.S. bourgeoisie, to provide a favorable resting place for our Althusserians. And so, for better or worse, they have found themselves within the developing anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist trend—although it is obvious that they are not at all comfortable with being so situated and would admit that it may very well be only a temporary phenomenon.

Largely because this trend has not yet matured politically and organizationally, it is not surprising, indeed inevitable, that Althusserian Marxism would have to develop a separate organizational form. At first, this form was only as a theoretical journal. But we are now observing *TR*'s attempt to establish itself organizationally through what appears to be an informal network of "like-minded" study circles and literature agents.

However reluctantly, *TR* functions within the anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist trend; its attraction is that it poses as an "open-minded, questioning" force within our trend. (And which Marxist-Leninists prefer to see themselves as closed-minded and dogmatic?) Unfortunately, such a demagogic appeal can gain influence in our trend, dominated heretofore by the "fusion" line, which has left cadre poorly trained and equipped to address the pressing theoretical and political

questions before it. In such a context, our Althusserians can appear to many quite impressive indeed—they are bold in their inquiries; well versed in the new theoreticians who are “at the frontiers of Marxist theory”; and they can speak a mysterious theoretical language all their own, all the more authoritative because it is so exotic.

A closer examination, however, shows that our “open-minded” Althusserians have developed some very pronounced answers to a host of questions. In particular, as we have demonstrated, its leading theoretical practitioners have proposed a wholesale revision of the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism. Undoubtedly our trend will learn to master Althusserian Marxism in the course of our struggle with it.

In this sense, *TR* has not really done its work properly. Instead of clearly explaining Althusserian Marxism in all its complexities, it has chosen to begin introducing its concepts and language as though it was rescuing Marxism-Leninism from the “Stalinian deviation.” Consequently we have attempted to do its work for it, constructing a roadmap through the twists and turns of Althusserian theory and politics. Now what remains is to make clear the ideological links between *TR* and its mentors and then to determine how this concretely impacts *TR*’s conception of the tasks before U.S. communists. This will be accomplished by extending the roadmap thus far constructed: that is, by highlighting *TR*’s links to Althusser’s philosophical concepts, Poulantzas’ political concepts, and Bettelheim’s views of the Cultural Revolution, Soviet history and socialist construction.

But a word of warning. *TR* is not simply the mirror image of Althusser, Poulantzas, and Bettelheim. In certain particulars, the three are mutually exclusive. At the same time, the underdeveloped state of *TR*’s politics has tended to obscure this difficulty for the moment. So in the course of our journey we will uncover certain contradictions in *TR*’s general construct, areas of either explicit or tacit disagreement between *TR* and the Althusserians. And, to be sure, certain questions undoubtedly remain unsettled between them.

#### A. *Theoretical Review and Althusser*

As might be expected, *TR* accepts the main theoretical constructs advanced by Althusser in relation to “economism” and the need to exorcise the Hegelian shade from Marxism. In this sense, *TR* must be held accountable to the explicit differences between Althusser and Marxism on the determining role of the economic in historical development.

It will be useful to quote *TR* directly to illustrate its *own* conception of the “economist problematic,” which is described as follows:

“a)insistence that the development of productive forces is the

decisive factor in social development (theory of productive forces);

"b) reduction of the class contradiction to an expression of the contradiction between forces and relations of production;

"c) insistence that under advanced capitalism production relations are an absolute block on the development of productive forces leading to stagnation, decay, crisis and inevitable capitalist collapse (economist catastrophism);

"d) this situation leading to permanently favorable objective conditions for proletarian revolution."<sup>122</sup>

On all these points, *TR* either departs from Marxism or caricatures it. Concerning the decisive role of the productive forces in the development of human society, there is no ambiguity whatsoever in Marx, who declares: "The social relations of production change, are transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, the productive forces."<sup>123</sup> Involved here is a classic debate between materialism and idealism. Materialists tie historical development to the level of development of the productive forces. Mechanical materialists distort this conception by holding that because the development of the productive forces *ultimately* determines the transformation of property relations, this transformation occurs in an evolutionary manner. Marxists hold that there is nothing automatic about it, that the transformation takes place as the result of class struggle. Idealists such as our Althusserians, on the other hand, hold that any conceivable system of relations of production can be effected simply by an act of will irrespective of the level of development of the productive forces. On this point, then, *TR* and the Althusserians completely revise Marxism.

Concerning class struggle as a reflection of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, we will simply note *TR*'s use of the word "reduction." Marxism holds that in *essence* (which, of course, is not the same as a mechanical reduction) the class contradiction is an expression of the contradiction between the level of development of the productive forces and the historically specific prevailing property relations. On this point, *TR* has caricatured and misrepresented the position of Marxism in order to depart from it.

Concerning the historically qualitative fetter of capitalist relations of production on the further development of human society, we find another subtle distortion, this time in the use of the term "absolute." Marxism does not see capitalist property relations as an "absolute" impediment to further development of the productive forces. Such a position is clearly untenable since the very nature of capitalist competition continues to engender certain advances in the production process. On the other hand, capitalist property relations *do* act as a fetter on the utilization of technological advances already achieved, most particularly by its inherent inability to develop centralized planning of the economy based on production for use rather than exchange. In addition, there is the

enormous waste of capital engendered by overproduction, cyclical crisis, brand name competition and the promotion and production of a vast array of socially unnecessary products, etc. On this point, *TR* makes a negative concession to the bourgeoisie, implying that capitalism in its moribund stage still retains the productive vitality of its revolutionary period. Today, monopoly capital's under-utilization and distortion of its own technological achievements combined with capitalist wastefulness and the suppression of certain technological inventions are the expressions of the fact that capitalist property relations are indeed a qualitative block on the development of the productive forces, even if that block is not *absolute* in an immediate historical sense.

Finally, concerning the favorable objective conditions for proletarian revolution, we have another subtle and gratuitous distortion with the words "permanently favorable." Clearly *TR*'s intent here is to say that proletarian revolution is not directly on the agenda for the working class in every advanced capitalist country. This is obviously the case. On the other hand, *historically speaking*, this is the epoch of proletarian revolution and, in that sense, the objective conditions for proletarian revolution are a permanent feature of this period. On this point *TR* has departed from Marxist dialectics by taking a *strategic* concept and caricaturing it as though it were a *tactical* concept. (This is precisely the error of modern revisionism in relegating the task of the proletariat in imperialist countries to a couple of more generations of building for "detente" rather than proletarian revolution—an important shade of difference indeed!)

*TR* also seems to have borrowed from Althusser the idealist conception of the relationship between theory and practice. *TR*'s own comment on the matter speaks for itself: "Marxism-Leninism abolishes the characteristic dichotomy existing in bourgeois thought between theory and practice by turning theory itself into a practice alongside the others."<sup>124</sup> It is remarkable how idealists believe that by changing a word they change reality, as though calling theory "theoretical practice" somehow is sufficient to tie theory to practice! Althusser at least began to think better of such idealist formulations. Unfortunately, *TR* seems not to have progressed even to Althusser's later self-criticism. In this sense, our comrades grouped around the *TR* might be termed the "young Althusserians."

## B. Theoretical Review and Poulantzas

The most remarkable aspect of the *TR*-Poulantzas connection is that in all of *TR*'s commentary there is not the slightest admission of Poulantzas' concluding notion of the "democratic road to socialism" or his explicit disavowals of Lenin's views on the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Considering the central role played by this conception



in forging Poulantzas' entire theoretical construct, the omission can hardly be an oversight.

What conclusion should we draw from this significant silence? We can think of three possible explanations; first, that *TR* disagrees with Poulantzas on these matters but fears that to make his views on the question known would set an unnecessary barrier in the way of dealing with his other contributions; or, that *TR* agrees with Poulantzas but considers it injudicious to say so at the moment; or finally, that *TR* has an "open mind" on these propositions, but acknowledging as much at the present moment would call into question its own vaunted anti-revisionist credentials.

Whatever the explanation, however, the omission is opportunist. The problem is that Poulantzas' polemic against the "instrumentalist" conception of the state is indelibly bound up with his surrender of the dictatorship of the proletariat and his explicit break with Leninism. Even if *TR*'s purpose was to salvage some of the useful things from Poulantzas' work, his break from Leninism should be duly noted and the assessment of his work should be clearly qualified and punctuated with criticism.

On the other hand, there is little doubt as to *TR*'s views on the "instrumentalist" conception of the state, taken from Poulantzas. In recent months, *TR* has launched a virtual mini-crusade against "instrumentalism." Most recently they chastized *Line of March* for committing the cardinal "instrumentalist" error of declaring that "the modern bourgeois state is nothing but an instrument of class rule."<sup>125</sup> In fact, we went so far as to claim that "the bourgeoisie brought into being the modern bourgeois-nation state,"<sup>126</sup> *TR* adding the emphasis to demonstrate the extent of our instrumentalist iniquity.

We have no objection to taking up the struggle over these remarks since they do highlight the differences between us. However it might have been appropriate for *TR* to note that our concrete analysis of the 1980 elections in which these statements were made took up the whole complex of forces operating within the bourgeois state and explicitly opposed a "conspiracy" view which sees the state simply as the puppet of the bourgeoisie.

In addition, it would have been at least as appropriate for *TR* to take issue openly with the source of these heresies, for we make no claim to originality in the matter. *TR* should direct itself to Engels who wrote:

"People think they have taken quite a bold step forward when they have rid themselves of belief in hereditary monarchy and swear by the democratic republic. In reality, however, the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than the monarchy."<sup>127</sup>

*TR* has every right to challenge Engels and Lenin on the Marxist theory of the state. But let them do so and stop using *Line of March* as a

foil to disguise the fact that their essential quarrel is with Marxism and not simply with some modern "instrumentalists" who are supposedly vulgarizing the Marxist theory of the state.

Before leaving Poulantzas we should note *TR*'s attempt to concretely apply Poulantzas' theory concerning the state to the class struggle in the U.S. Poulantzas argues, readers will recall, that all classes are represented in the modern state, the dominated classes in "centers of opposition" to the dominant classes. So *TR* has undertaken to locate the sites in the U.S. state apparatus where the dominated classes appear, not at all an easy task, as one might imagine. (*In These Times* locates these sites in the legislative branch—at least potentially—a designation which is at least consistent with Poulantzas, who sees the presence of working class parties in the bourgeois parliaments as a presence in "the state," thus making the common petit bourgeois error of equating the government for the state.) But *TR* has decided to dig deeper, especially since locating the presence of the working class in the U.S. Congress would undoubtedly prove a thankless pursuit. (This is not to deny the fact that there are individuals in Congress who more or less defend the *immediate* interests of the working class; but this can hardly be equated with having the working class *represented* in the state.)

In its anxiety to find a living example of Poulantzas' theory in the U.S., *TR* completely misrepresents the political significance and consequences of the reform struggle, as witness the following gem: "The masses are present throughout the state system which 'serves' them in all the mechanisms of the social welfare apparatuses, those pertaining specifically to the workingclass (unemployment compensation, workers compensation, National Labor Relations Act, etc.), and education . . . . The masses are also present in the state because of the many members of the petty bourgeoisie and the workingclass who are state employees."<sup>128</sup> The contradiction between those sectors of the state apparatus where "the masses are present" and those which the dominant classes control is "evidenced by recent rulings concerning 'reverse discrimination,' that is, measures taken by the judicial apparatuses overriding victories of oppressed minorities in the educational apparatuses."<sup>129</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss this nonsense out of hand. But this curious effort should not be taken lightly, for taken to its logical conclusion—which is not very many steps distant—it promotes the illusion of the masses winning *portions* of state power through the reform struggle. This view is the heart and soul of revisionism. It has nothing in common with Marxism-Leninism which, while not in any way belittling the significance of the reform struggle for the training of the masses and the expansion of the terrain of democracy, precisely argues against the conception of a gradual take-over of power through the step-by-step process of occupying larger and larger sections of the state. *TR*'s

examples applying Poulantzas' theories to the U.S. inevitably lead to such a view, despite rhetorical militance about "class struggle on the terrain of the state."

### C. *Theoretical Review*, Bettelheim, and the "Stalinian Deviation"

If *TR* borrows its philosophy from Althusser and its theory of the state from Poulantzas, it takes its theory of socialism and socialist construction from Bettelheim. It also finds in Bettelheim a soul-mate who defends the Cultural Revolution in China and offers a defense of Bukharin's line (albeit not nearly as enthusiastic as *TR*'s).

Our theoretical differences with *TR* and Bettelheim on socialism have been drawn out elsewhere. In this section we will confine our remarks to three points: on *TR*'s conception of the Cultural Revolution and the implications for *TR*'s views of the party, on differences between *TR* and the Althusserians on the assessment of Stalin, and on what's behind *TR*'s enthusiasm for Bukharin.

First, *TR*'s views on the Cultural Revolution provide significant insight into its conception of the party and the role of individuals in relation to the party.

"To counter the potential danger of Party usurpation of power, Mao felt it was always necessary to be able to encircle the Party and State mechanism from above and below. It was only with Mao *standing above the Party* that the masses were able to participate in its rectification during the Cultural Revolution. . . . If Mao's approach to the problem of Party-mass relations is correct, then the highest levels of Party leadership must always include members willing and able to unite with the masses at various levels to challenge capitalist roaders and their allies in an otherwise invincible Party."<sup>130</sup> (our emphasis)

This is a plain assault on the Leninist principles of the role of the party vis-a-vis the masses, norms of inner-party struggle, party discipline, etc. Even Mao was far too cautious to raise such an explicit attack on the party.

Of course, the most blatant factionalism will always present itself in the name of combatting "capitalist-roaders" or the semantic equivalent. As to the principle of collective leadership, apparently our extremely democratic *TR* has no use for it. Better to trust the judgment of the great individual who, for whatever reason, has established sufficient popularity with the masses to be able to defy and override the collective leadership of the party. *TR* has no opposition in principle to the "cult of personality"—it depends on who the "personality" is. *TR* and Bettelheim have problems with Stalin, but little with Mao. In the concrete manifestation of the Cultural Revolution, Mao imperiously overrode the collective leadership of the party time and again in pursuit of a voluntarist and factionalist nightmare. ✓

Our second point concerns the "Stalinian deviation." *TR*'s critique of Stalin is unrelenting. Not the slightest acknowledgement is made that possibly some aspects of Stalin's line actually had positive results.

Neither Bettelheim, in his ambitious historical studies, nor Althusser, in his rare excursions into political commentary upon concrete history, are nearly so unqualified in their criticism of Stalin.

Apparently Althusser's political history as a partisan in the struggle against fascism and the decisive role of the USSR throughout that period led him to the following admission:

"Stalin cannot be *reduced* to the deviation which we have linked to his name; even less can this be done with the Third International which he came in the thirties to dominate. He had other historical merits. He understood that it was *necessary* to abandon the miraculous idea of an imminent world revolution and to undertake instead the construction of socialism in one country. And he drew the consequences: it must be defended at any cost as the foundation and last line of defense of socialism throughout the world, it must be made into an impregnable fortress capable of withstanding the imperialist siege; and, to that end, it must be provided with a heavy industry. It was this very industry that turned out the Stalingrad tanks which served the heroic struggle of the Soviet people in their fight to the death to liberate the world from Nazism. Our history *also* passed in that direction. And in spite of the deformations, caricatures and tragedies for which this period is responsible, it must be recalled that millions of Communists also learned, even if Stalin 'taught' them in dogmatic form, that there existed *Principles of Leninism*." <sup>131</sup>

It is a pity that *TR*, in its emulation of Bettelheim and Althusser, confines itself only to their departures from historical materialism but leaves behind their more substantive grasp of history and politics.

Our third point is closely related. *TR*'s passion for Bukharin does not appear to be a universal principle of Althusserian Marxism. Even Bettelheim, who has many kind things to say about Bukharin, is much more cautious. What is the source of *TR*'s enthusiasm for Bukharin? Surely it must be for more than Bukharin's line on socialist construction which, however much *TR* might agree with one or another formulation, is the very opposite of a "class struggle" line.

There is a clue to this apparent enigma and it has to do more with the struggle in the history of the CPUSA than with those of the CPSU. For corresponding to the split in the CPSU and in the Comintern in 1929 was the internal struggle in the CPUSA which pitted forces led by Jay Lovestone (linked internationally to Bukharin forces) against those led by William Z. Foster. And Paul Costello, editor of *TR*, turns out to be a late-blooming Lovestoneite. Here is Costello's summation of that line struggle in the CPUSA:



"To be decided was the question: was American communism going to develop on the basis of its own analysis of the specific features of American capitalism and its corresponding class struggle, or was it going to be locked into the mechanical repetition of general formulas produced elsewhere? One line, the party majority, was led by Jay Lovestone, Benjamin Gitlow and Bertram Wolfe.\* The other, the minority, was led by Foster, Cannon (the father of American Trotskyism) and Browder among others. . . . At issue was not the belief by the Lovestone forces that America was immune from the laws of capitalism, but their refusal to wholeheartedly embrace the ultra-left line of Stalin in the Comintern, based on their independent analysis of the reality of U.S. capitalism, the recognition that America was not on the eve of revolutionary upheaval and the knowledge that sectarian practice would not build the party. . . .

"By formulating the issue as 'American exceptionalism', Stalin and his supporters insisted that the sole function of American communists was to repeat the general laws of world capitalism and the corresponding communist tactics as set forth by the Comintern executive. By definition, U.S. capitalism could be fully understood by knowing these general laws; any attempt to go beyond the general to the specifics of U.S. capitalism was to be viewed with suspicion as 'American exceptionalism'." <sup>132</sup>

We will not undertake to review the actual line struggle in the CPUSA in the period under question at this time. The point is that this description by Costello reveals a certain precise political and ideological position being brought to bear on his assessment of the history of the CPUSA.

The Lovestone line was never realized in life politically or organizationally, never becoming a material force in U.S. life. The subsequent history of the CPUSA hardly bears out Costello's view that Foster's line "would not build the party." The party, guided by Foster's line, went on to lead struggles against racism and on behalf of the unorganized and unemployed, and became a substantial force in U.S. political life—hardly a sign of dogmatic repetition of "general principles."

#### D. Theoretical Review and Party Building

One key lesson of communist history which our movement has not yet fully grasped is that the question of party building cannot be viewed separately from the very conception of the kind of party that will be built. TR's conception of the Leninist party is no exception to this general rule.

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\*Lovestone, Gitlow, and Wolfe all became, in relatively short order, not only renegades from communism, but paid agents of the bourgeoisie. Lovestone was for many years George Meany's direct liason with the CIA and was himself a paid agent of the CIA. Gitlow became an informer as did Wolfe.

✓ Lenin's conception of the "party of a new type" was based on one fundamental principle: the requirements of the class struggle determine the basic character and organizational form of the party. The party is a ✓ *political* party, meaning that its internal life (including its organizational forms) is based on its capacity to change the world. The party is a ✓ *proletarian* party because it is organized in order to train and lead the working class in the tasks of proletarian revolution. The party is a ✓ *democratic* party because the triumph of the proletariat is the realization of democracy, that is rule by and in the interests of the majority of the people, the laboring masses. It is only within this framework that such questions as the proletarian *composition* of the party or its *democratic internal life* can be addressed. Not that these questions are unimportant; but they are not the determining questions and cannot be analyzed in isolation from the overall work of the party in the class struggle. Composition and process may impact politics, but they are not in themselves politics.

*TR* completely fails to grasp this central point. Thus it puts forward the absurd proposition of "the Leninist conception of the party as embodying a contradiction of democracy and centralism under the domination of the former."<sup>133</sup> In his own time, Lenin laughed such nonsense out of court. That democratic-centralism, the party organizational form, embodies a contradiction between democracy and centralism is hardly a discovery. But the "domination" of which *TR* speaks does not arise out of the relationship between democracy and centralism. It arises out of the relationship between the party and the realities of the class struggle and includes a materialist assessment of the capacities of the cadre who comprise the party and its periphery.

Contrary to *TR*'s assertion, by and large, centralism is the principal feature of the Leninist party. Leadership leads. Lower bodies are subordinate to higher bodies. Local forms are subordinate to national forms. The individual is subordinate to the collective. In fact, the Leninist party was developed precisely in response to the political *ineffectiveness* of the ultra-democratic Russian Social Democratic Party that preceded it. This is why Lenin called for "a centralized, militant organization that consistently carries out a Social-Democratic policy, that satisfies. . . all revolutionary instincts and strivings."<sup>134</sup>

But *TR* has another view. The party must be constructed as a model of internal (bourgeois) democracy. At a time when the communist movement's backwardness is clearly related to a lack of leadership and the absence of a leading political line, *TR* tells us that the "internal political practice" of the communist movement is chiefly characterized by cadre training and "the struggle against bourgeois ideology and the development and reproduction of bourgeois political practices within the communist movement as manifested in the separation of leaders from the general membership on one hand and from the masses on the other."<sup>135</sup>

Of course, as a general proposition, no one will argue on behalf of the separation of leaders from cadre or from the class struggle. But this is not simply a logical question. This is a particular historical question and it is very clear that *TR* has made the question of internal (bourgeois) democratic practice the centerpiece of its conception of the party. To Lenin, the organizational *form* of the party clearly flowed from the party's function in the class struggle. "The character of any organization," he writes, "is naturally and inevitably determined by the content of its activity."<sup>136</sup> Naturally, the proper training of cadre capable of actually playing the role of vanguard in the class struggle is a key aspect of such a conception.

There is an important shade of difference between *TR* and Leninism here. We do not doubt that *TR* would of course argue that its "democratic" form is the best suited for the party's vanguard role in the class struggle. We would concede the need to maintain an active, democratic inner-party life. But there still remains an important difference here beneath the superficial exchange of platitudes. What is principal? Does a "democratic" organization simply determine, by majority vote, the tasks of the class struggle and organize itself accordingly? Or does a core of Marxist-Leninists develop a leading line on the tasks of the class struggle and move to build a party around that line?

What gives a party its *democratic* character? First and foremost, the party is in the service of proletarian revolution, that is, it will lead the struggle for the realization of *proletarian* democracy. Second, it raises the theoretical level of the party cadre so that they can in fact interact with all of the discussions, debates, and proposals developed within the party. Third, it practices the principle of collective leadership at every level of the party. (Where is democracy in the principle of an individual "standing above" the party, of which *TR* approves?) Fourth, the party practices criticism/self-criticism at every level of the party. Fifth, it promotes inner-party debate over all line questions and *holds all comrades accountable for their opinions*. Sixth, it holds regular party congresses (when conditions of the class struggle permit) at which fundamental questions of line and direction are debated and decided upon and at which national leadership is elected. And seventh, the party remains a *voluntary* organization not only in letter but also in spirit and practice. We have by no means exhausted the democratic characteristics of a Leninist party, but these should be sufficient to demonstrate our views on the matter.

The key point, however, is the first one. And unless this is seen as the foundation of the party, its defining characteristic which determines the content of all other questions—including the various secondary democratic questions—then we are no longer discussing a Leninist party at all.

Finally, let us examine *TR*'s line on party building. This is popularly known as the "primacy of theory" party building line. Because of its emphasis on theory in the present period, many people in our movement tended to confuse *TR*'s conception of party building with the *rectification* line on party building, which also places principal emphasis on our theoretical tasks. As of late, *TR* has begun to loudly insist this is not the case—one of the few points upon which we wholeheartedly agree with *TR*.

*TR* introduces the category of "internal political practice," which it maintains is primary in the current period. The goals of this internal practice are two-fold: "the production of communist cadre capable of serving a national party"; and "the production of what our movement is lacking: the theoretical tools with which to grasp the world."<sup>137</sup>

More specifically, *TR* holds that "cadre and organizations must *first* develop the theoretical tools necessary *before* engaging in a true scientific analysis that will provide the basis for a strategy for effective political intervention in the class struggle in the U.S."<sup>138</sup> (our emphasis)

Aside from the significant fact that the "tools" which *TR* proposes to develop for the movement are the principles of Althusserian Marxism, this conception of party building is thoroughly idealist and schematic. It reflects a typically petit bourgeois emphasis on process over content and has no sense of materialist dialectics.

Cadre training is not a separate and precedent stage in the development of political line and practice. Cadre training can only take place under the actual conditions of the struggle to realize the central political task at any moment. Similarly, analytical *tools* cannot be developed independently of the concrete theoretical and practical tasks before the communist movement.

This is a central conception of the rectification movement, a basic materialist conception of cadre training and theoretical work. For the concrete political task before communists—the forging of a general political line (whether one wants to use the term rectification or not)—sets the conditions for cadre development and the only political criteria for judging the efforts at training cadre and developing the movement's theoretical tools.

If *TR*'s understanding of the content of the communist movement's "internal political practice" is an idealist departure from Marxism, its flip side notion of "external political practice" is even more peculiar. Not surprisingly, *TR* has not devoted much attention to this question, but the few comments it has made are startling. The most revealing is probably the following:

"We understand the present conjuncture as one of the relative stability of U.S. capitalism internally, the relative absence of mass working class struggles, and the absence of either a genuine communist



party or the theory and political practice capable of building the U.S. communist movement. . . . The external aspect of communist political practice is first and foremost the struggle to win the working class and oppressed people to communism. . . . The present stable conjuncture limits the amount of external political practice which can be done in a communist as opposed to an economist or reformist nature." <sup>139</sup>

It is hard to imagine on what basis *TR* concludes that the present "conjuncture" is one characterized by the "relative stability of U.S. capitalism internally," except that the qualifying term "relative" can obviously mean whatever one chooses it to mean. It is true that the recent period has been characterized by an ebb in the mass struggles, but that can hardly be equated with "stability." The fact is that even in this relatively quiescent period, the political and economic contradictions of U.S. capitalism have intensified conspicuously. The system's economic life is far from stable with unprecedented levels of inflation, massive structural unemployment, an ailing steel industry and an even sicker auto industry (the two pillars of the U.S. industrial plant), galloping interest rates, and a floating dollar, to cite only a few of the phenomena. Nor can capitalism's political life be considered stable if for 20 years not a single U.S. president has been able to complete two terms in office while the political institutions of the state have suffered an enormous weakening of moral and ideological authority.

But we will not belabor the point since even if *TR*'s analysis were accurate, their concept of "external political practice" would still be completely unsound.

*TR* assures us that winning the working class and oppressed people to "communism" is the chief goal of communist political practice in this period. Such a view betrays an utter lack of a sense of politics. The principal goal of communist political practice must be to transform the present consciousness of the U.S. working class from its present backward state to take up the struggle in defense of its immediate political as well as economic interests; in the course of which the independent work of the communists must be to instill among a substantial section of the working class the realization of the importance of the struggle for state power. Without addressing the class struggle in a thoroughly political fashion, idle talk about winning the workers to "communism" degenerates into sheer utopianism.

Finally, does a relatively "stable conjuncture" limit the *amount* of external political practice by the communists? A worse formulation of the question cannot be imagined. Is *TR* asserting that our intervention in the class struggle will be quantitatively limited because this is not a revolutionary period? The backward state of the working class movement under the conditions of "relative stability" alerts the communist movement to the quality and dimensions of its historic tasks.

We certainly understand the limits imposed on communist intervention in the class struggle in a period without a party and without a leading line to guide that intervention. We have on other occasions, in debate with our fusionist comrades, warned against the inevitable tendency toward reformism which will characterize such intervention precisely because the communists are unprepared to give revolutionary leadership under present circumstances. But no communist can seriously accept the *TR* view that treats work in the class struggle as a matter of lesser importance simply because the level of that struggle is not yet at a revolutionary point.

What level must the class struggle reach and how relatively *unstable* must U.S. capitalism become before *TR* is convinced that the communists will not be in danger of being contaminated by reformism? Does *TR* think that the communist movement will succeed in retaining its revolutionary purity by the extent to which it does *not* participate in the class struggle in such a period? Here we have come full circle, back to the political impotency and cynicism which conspicuously characterize the unremolded intellectuals who constitute the social base for Althusserian Marxism.

### E. Conclusion

Where is *TR* going? Despite a momentary flurry of activity, its prospects are not promising. Among the individuals presently aligning themselves with *TR*, it is only fair to say that most are responding to what they perceive to be an "open-minded," anti-dogmatic stance rather than to the principles of an Althusserian Marxism, which has yet to demonstrate its capacity to operate as a material force anywhere in the communist movement, let alone in the broader class struggle. That this school of Marxism will prove any different in the U.S. is highly doubtful.

So far *TR*'s editorial board is trying to maintain a tenuous link between the diverse currents which make up Althusserian Marxism, here promoting Althusser's philosophy, there celebrating Poulantzas' critique of "instrumentalism," throughout basing itself on Bettelheim's theoretical framework concerning socialism while hedging at openly following him down the path of the capitalist restoration thesis. But in the long run this eclectic mish-mash is not tenable. So long as it confines itself to the struggle against the "Stalinian deviation," it will undoubtedly find some sympathizers, within our trend as well as outside of it. But history has long since demonstrated that anti-Stalinism is an opportunist basis for unity. As a force within the communist movement it has always been inherently unstable, leading to a succession of factionalizing ventures. In the broader class struggle its tendency to merge with anticommunism can hardly be overlooked or considered accidental.

But as soon as *TR* ventures beyond the present confines of popularizing the basic principles of Althusserian Marxism and waging

the struggle against "Stalinism," it will face formidable political difficulties. The contradictory nature of its underlying unity is bound to emerge in the realm of politics while its view of the nature and role of a party will prevent it from taking the very steps required to mature the U.S. communist movement and prepare it to take up the immense tasks history has placed before us.

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